



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Food and  
Nutrition  
Service

Mountain  
Plains  
Region

1244 Speer Boulevard  
Denver, CO 80204

Reply to  
Attn. of: SP 94-C-32

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Subject: Offer versus Serve

To: STATE DIRECTORS  
(Special Nutrition Programs) - Colorado ED, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri ED,  
Montana OPI, Nebraska ED, North Dakota,  
South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming ED

"Offer versus Serve" is a serving method used in schools participating in the National School Lunch Program which allows students to turn down (or take smaller portions of) one or two of the five food items in the lunch if they do not intend to eat them. The method must be implemented in senior high schools. The local school food authority (SFA), however, has the option of implementing Offer versus Serve in elementary, junior high, and middle schools. The local SFA also has the latitude to determine whether these younger students would be required to take a minimum of three or four food items. The SFA, whether high school or below, cannot decide which food item a student may or may not refuse by requiring that certain food items be taken.

There is, however, one area in which there is an exception. That exception is with preplate delivery system. Preplate delivery system does not mean that at the time of meal service (on-site), a tray is prepared with three or four items and the student going through the line has a choice of whether or not to take the other one or two items. Preplate delivery system means meals prepared and packaged off-site as a unit and delivered to a serving site. SFAs with preplate delivery systems may participate in the Offer versus Serve provision within the limits discussed below.

Implementation of Offer versus Serve in Preplate Systems - The Congressional intent for permitting Offer versus Serve is to allow students to refuse food items they do not intend to consume. The objective is to reduce food waste and food costs resulting from that wasted food. To require schools with a preplate delivery system to convert to a system that would allow food items to be individually contained just to be able to implement Offer versus Serve would be unreasonable and would defeat the objective to reduce costs. Therefore, in order to allow students in schools with a preplate delivery system some choice, these schools are allowed to implement Offer versus Serve to the extent that is possible as long as students take at least three full portions.

Therefore, preplate systems may utilize the Offer versus Serve provision but the SFA and State agency must be aware of the inherent problems with implementation depending on the type of system. For example:

1. SFAs which package four components together and the milk (or other component) separately, may implement Offer versus Serve with only the milk (or other component) as the item of choice. In certain situations, this may be necessary, especially where there is a large central kitchen operation. Where possible, the State should make every reasonable effort to work with the SFA to find a practical alternative to the service system so that more choices are available to the students. This may be possible in bag lunch situations. For example, the SFA may be able to lay out the components separately on a serving line and allow the students to make choices and then bag their lunch.
2. SFAs which offer a "hot pack," a "cold pack" and milk each day may also implement Offer versus Serve. The problems in this type of system concern which items or groups of items may be refused and still have selected a reimbursable lunch. For example:
  - a. SFAs which offer a two-item cold pack, a two-item hot pack and milk each day allow the children the most choice. A child can refuse the cold pack or the hot pack or the milk and select a reimbursable lunch.
  - b. SFAs which offer a three-item pack, a one-item pack and milk each day allow the children to refuse the one item pack or the milk.
  - c. SFAs which vary the number of items in the hot and cold packs each day would have the most difficulty implementing Offer versus Serve. This is because the servers would have to determine on a daily basis which "packs" the children could refuse and still select a reimbursable meal.

In the situations described above, the child may refuse more than one type of component or "pack." In these situations, the SFA may not mandate which of the "expendable" components or packs (those which can be refused and still have selected a reimbursable lunch) the child may refuse.

We hope this has clarified our policy on the use of the Offer versus Serve provision in preplate and prepackaged systems. If you have any questions, please call (303) 844-0354.

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